

**SCHOOLS FORUM
16 DECEMBER 2019
4.35 - 6.10 PM**



Present:

Liz Cole, Primary School Representative (Headteacher)
Karen Davis, Primary School Representative (Headteacher)
Neil Davies, Primary School Representative (Headteacher)
Martin Gocke, Pupil Referral Unit Representative (Governor) (Chairman)
Stuart Matthews, Academy School Representative (Headteacher) (Vice-Chairman)
Roger Prew, Primary School Representative (Governor)
Debbie Smith, Secondary School Representative (Headteacher)
Richard Stok, Primary School Representative (Governor)
Michelle Tuddenham, PVI Provider Representative

Councillor Dr Gareth Barnard, Executive Member for Children, Young People & Learning (Observer)

Apologies for absence were received from:

Jane Coley, Academy School Representative (Headteacher)
Peter Floyd, Special School Representative (Governor)
Brian Poxon, Secondary School Representative (Governor)
Phil Sherwood, Primary School Representative (Headteacher)

123. Apologies for Absence/Substitute Members

There were no Substitute Members.

124. Declarations of Interest

There were no declarations of interests.

125. Minutes and Matters Arising

The Forum noted an amendment to minute 121 of the Forum held on 21 November 2019 as follows:

“RESOLVED

...

2. to AGREE:

- i. the budget changes for 2020-21, as summarised in Table 4, with particular consideration given to:
 - a. the impact of changes in funding to the CSSB; and
 - b. that the Minimum Funding Guarantee is set at the maximum amount of +1.84%;
- ii. on-going central retention by the Council of Central School Services funding for the areas and amounts set out in Annex 4;
- iii. the updated criteria for allocating funds to schools experiencing significant in year increases in pupil numbers be implemented from the October 2019 census (Annex 5); and

iv. that options be developed for the December meeting to consider whether amendments should be made to the distribution of funds to schools in order for 1 FE schools to receive increases close to the overall average increase in per pupil funding.

3 To DEFER a decision on the following to the next meeting:

a. the revised medium-term funding strategy for meeting the additional cost arising from the Growth Fund (Annex 3);

b. the elements of the 2020-21 Growth Fund (Table 3);

c the updated text for the Funding Policy for New and Expanded Schools (Annex 1);”

RESOLVED that the amended minutes of the meeting of the Forum held on 21 November 2019 be approved and signed by the Chairman as a correct record.

Arising from minute 117 Chris Taylor had prepared the latest projections of forecast pupil numbers and available places which was included on the agenda.

Arising from minute 119 Derek Morgan would ensure that any confidential papers could be accessed by all members before meetings.

Also arising from minute 119 Cherry Hall had prepared final figures for the additional funding for early years for 2020-21 which was included on the agenda.

Arising from minute 121 Paul Clark had checked the legal status of whether the Forum would be statutorily tied to previous decisions made in relation to financing and associated budget for the Growth Fund, and this was detailed in the background papers relating to Item 7 of the agenda.

Arising from minute 122 Joanna Gibbons confirmed that the Council Chamber was booked for all forthcoming meetings apart from the meeting to be held on 16 January 2019.

126. **Childcare Sufficiency Assessment**

The Forum considered a report which presented the Childcare Sufficiency Assessment (CSA).

Cherry Hall advised that the CSA shows there was sufficient childcare provision in the Borough, and prospective providers were being advised of that. Further analysis was required on the impact of new housing and business growth in the Town Centre (TC) on supply and demand. This was more difficult to assess for pre-school age children.

Following presentation to Schools Forum the CSA would be submitted to the executive member for approval in January 2020 and subsequently published on the Bracknell Forest Council (BFC) website where it would be available to the public.

The Forum questioned how the expected decrease in the birth rate would be managed. Cherry Hall admitted that it was a challenge and difficult to predict. The CSA was looking at 2019-2023 but a lot of the children wouldn't have been born yet. Lots of parents were using informal childcare so the Council was looking at promoting the free entitlement in the Town & Country magazine. The next step would be to look at how many young children were coming in and going out of the Borough for childcare. Cherry Hall explained that the team were talking a lot to providers and advising them about changing their business models to be more attractive to parents.

The aim was to try to help existing providers to stay sustainable and discourage new provision.

The Forum queried whether the Council had any other mechanism to prevent new provision apart from just discouragement. Cherry Hall advised that the Council could only discourage; Ofsted was the only body which had the power to register or not register.

The Forum asked whether existing providers knew they would have to manage a reduction in numbers? Cherry Hall explained that once providers become aware, they would often approach the Council for advice. Some providers have managed quite well but others were not so business-minded so lots of work had been done around that. For example, when the Government introduced extended 30 hours free entitlement for 3- and 4-year olds of working parents, the council supported providers who required help with business modelling. Michelle Tuddenham added that small businesses had complications in their staffing models and weren't able to lay off workers in the quiet autumn period and ask them to come back in January; instead, they kept workers on and hoped they would generate sufficient funding during the busy times to fund them during the quieter times.

The Forum questioned what the impact would be of the TC development. Cherry Hall explained that there was one nursery within the TC area which would be displaced with the changes happening in Coopers Hill. If that provision were to be lost there would be a deficit, so the team was looking at where to relocate that provision.

RESOLVED to NOTE the contents of the Childcare Sufficiency Assessment, which indicated that there was sufficient childcare in Bracknell Forest to meet demand and the ongoing work to understand the impact of new housing and town centre developments on supply and demand.

127. **2020/21 Proposals for the Early Years Block Budget**

The Forum considered a report which sought agreement to proposals for 2020-21 Early Years budgets, including the values to be attributed to the BFC Early Years Funding Formula (EYFF). There was also a decision to consider in line with the statutory funding framework.

Cherry Hall explained that the figures took into consideration the changes the Forum agreed at the last meeting in relation to funding providers for deprivation.

To inform future changes, expenditure through the EYFF was analysed and compared to the agreed budget allocations and showed, amongst other things, that the Special Educational Needs Inclusion Fund (SENIF) overspent by 17% and that the council was subsidising some provider support services.

Cherry Hall advised that, if all the proposals put to the Forum were accepted, 14 providers would see a decrease in funding of up to 1.5% in hourly rate. However, most providers would see an increase. All decreases were due to changes in eligibility for the deprivation supplement, either due to changes in children attending or corrections in the calculation method. The 14 providers affected were mostly private or voluntary providers including childminders but three were schools.

RESOLVED to AGREE that:

1. for the 2020-21 financial year
 - i. the Early Years DSG income budget be set at £7.560m (Table 2 of the report);

- ii. the funding rates in the Early Years Funding Formula are as set out in Table 4 of the report; and
 - iii. the relevant budgets are as set out in Annex 1; and
2. there are appropriate arrangements in place for administration of the Early Years free entitlement funding.

128. **School Places Plan and Capital Strategy**

The Forum considered a report which presented the School Places Plan and Capacity Strategy (SPP) 2020-24. These were last approved by the Executive in January 2017 and have been updated to cover the five-year period from 2020 to 2024.

Chris Taylor explained that primary school numbers were decreasing across the Borough. Secondary numbers were still increasing as the previous rise of primary numbers was working its way up through secondary schools. The two main factors affecting pupil numbers were birth rate, which was decreasing, and new housing, where predictions often exceeded delivery. Pupil yields arising from new housing have also decreased.

Chris Taylor highlighted the new mainstream pupil forecasting methodology (outlined in Annex 1 of the report), which was based on the principle of cohort survival and DfE guidance as well as consideration of best practice from neighbouring authorities and an external specialist. The Forum questioned whether the methodology has been tested on previous years to validate it. Chris Taylor advised that it had been tested to a degree and found to work.

Primary Schools

In September 2019 half of primary schools had no surplus places and the other half had surpluses to varying degrees. Borough-wide this amounted to a total surplus of 905 places or 8%. Therefore, there were no plans to add any additional primary school capacity in this forecast period. Demand for places would be met across each planning area, acknowledging that pupils could travel to neighbouring schools if their catchment area school was full, but could not be expected to travel further across the borough or to neighbouring boroughs.

As surplus places put pressure on school budgets, the capacity strategy outlined that removal of further surplus places may be required during the forecast period. This could be achieved by converting teaching spaces to other uses such as learning support or leasing out surplus accommodation to paying tenants.

The Forum queried why the strategy did not include the possibility of closing schools. Chris Taylor replied that there didn't appear to be any appetite in the Council to close schools, so this was not included in the strategy. Councillor Barnard added that local schools for local children was very important to the Council and that there was a need to hold onto local links.

Chris Taylor advised that reductions in school places would need to be carefully considered in the light of the surplus places at each school. Removal of surplus places would also need to go hand in hand with finding compatible alternative uses for the surplus accommodation.

The Forum questioned whether the Council had a list of schools they were earmarking. Chris Taylor advised that, if the strategy were to be agreed, it would be put into place and those schools would be identified and then contacted. Chris

stressed the importance of input from the Forum regarding the strategy and was happy to take ideas of measures to reduce surplus places.

Academy numbers were not set by the Council, but where academy schools had shared their capacity plans with the Council, these had been incorporated into the SPP.

The Forum discussed the overall population demographic and hypothesised that the low numbers of people aged 30-45 possibly related to a lack of affordable housing. Councillor Barnard advised that the Council Plan included provision for affordable housing.

The Forum asked how place planning would impact the schools' budget on the shorter term. Chris Taylor explained that they had identified which schools were not full but had not done budget planning scenarios. It was agreed that this would be the logical next step.

Action: Chris Taylor

Secondary Schools

There was a shrinking surplus of places at secondary schools, and only two schools had significant surpluses of places. Borough-wide in September 2019 there was a surplus of 967 places or 13%.

The secondary school capacity strategy included planning on a Borough-wide basis as secondary-aged pupils could travel between planning areas to secure a school place if their catchment area school was full. This meant that forecast demand was likely to be balanced as some schools would have deficits and others would have surpluses of places.

The strategy included Kings Group Academy (KGA) Binfield expanding from a Published Admission Numbers (PAN) of 150 in September 2019 to a PAN of 210 from September 2021, which was a previous commitment. This was balanced out however by Garth Hill College and Easthampstead Park schools both requesting their PANs be reduced by 1FE from September 2021.

The Forum questioned whether it could consider the implication of KGA's plan to make their admissions criteria prioritise children from their feeder. Chris Taylor advised that this was not under our direct control but that the Council would expect to be consulted on any changes to their admissions arrangements.

Post-16

In September 2019 there was a significant surplus 813 places or 46%. By September 2024 this was expected to fall to a surplus of 28% but even that was felt to be significant. The proposed Post 16 Strategy therefore included undertaking a joint review of Post 16 capacity with schools to look at the surplus places during the next forecast period.

The Forum queried whether there was a net import or export of post-16 students. Chris Taylor replied that admissions into Post 16 was a school responsibility and the Council did not have details of the numbers of applications for which school. He observed that we would never expect to keep 100% of post-16 students in our schools as many would choose to go to other colleges (e.g. Bracknell & Wokingham College or Farnborough Sixth Form College).

The Forum questioned whether the Council considered pressures in neighbouring authorities in the strategy. Chris Taylor shared that there had been joint working with neighbouring authorities who seemed to be experiencing similar patterns of school admissions including reducing primary numbers in the intake year. Having surplus school places in neighbouring authorities could exacerbate the issues in Bracknell Forest as it provided more scope for parental preference.

The Forum asked what the plan was to take this strategy forward. Chris Taylor advised that the paper would go to the Executive in January 2020 and, if agreed, would then be published and the team would start working on actions soon after. The next steps would be looking at the criteria, talking to schools re numbers, and commencing the post-16 review. A detailed action plan would be shared.

Action: Chris Taylor

The Forum requested an analysis of which schools would be most affected by the predicted period of financial turbulence. This would be presented in the meeting of the Forum in March 2020.

Action: Chris Taylor

The Forum noted that primary schools in the north of the Borough had particular issues and it was agreed to hold a meeting with relevant members in January as long as the paper was approved by the Executive.

Action: Chris Taylor

The Chairman thanked Chris for the comprehensive and well explained presentation.

RESOLVED to NOTE the School Places Plan and School Capacity Strategy 2020-24.

129. **2020/21 Proposals for the Schools Block and Central School Services Block**

The Forum considered a report which updated on the 2020-21 budget proposals that were presented to the last meeting of the Forum. Associated decisions needed to be agreed in order to meet the 21 January 2020 statutory deadline for agreeing individual school budgets.

Paul Clark explained that data had not yet been received from the DfE which was needed to calculate actual school budgets so there would be fluctuations from that as well as an imminent update on school business rates. Two other budget matters remained outstanding: diseconomy funding top-ups for new schools, and whether changes should be made to the values in the BF Funding Formula to ensure a larger average increase in per pupil funding for 1 Form Entry (FE) schools.

KGA Binfield Diseconomy Funding

Regarding the question as to whether we were legally obliged to pay diseconomy top-up funding, Paul Clark advised that we were not, but any changes made to current arrangements needed to be reasonable. The specification developed for the required competition for the new provider – which KGA won – confirmed diseconomy funding “would be provided until the school reaches a viable size”.

On the current model, KGA Binfield was forecast to receive £5,721 per pupil which was 3.3% higher than average per pupil funding at the two other highest funded

secondary schools, and 9.7% higher than the average for all secondary schools. The Forum was asked to consider whether the current funding allocation was reasonable. Paul Clark was asked if he was able to advise as the finance professional on the question of reasonableness and he replied that his view was that it was reasonable, taking account of the circumstances at the school which would be at around 40% capacity in September 2020. The Forum enquired whether the test of reasonableness could be set against a benchmark of other local authorities. Paul Clark agreed to seek information from other local authorities.

Action: Paul Clark

The Forum expressed the following:

- Allocating precious funds to KGA felt awkward but it would be unfair on KGA to make changes at this stage before all the data was available; and
- Diseconomy could be seen in different areas in different schools such as running costs of older buildings.

Councillor Barnard queried whether BFC would only fund the additional cost of setting up KGA to the number of places agreed. Paul Clark advised that this was the case and that KGA would have to bear the financial risk of anything additional.

The Forum enquired whether it would be possible to quantify what the diseconomy scale looked like in terms of outcomes over 6-9 months. Paul Clark explained that it would be difficult to link that to outcomes.

1 FE primary school funding

The Forum were presented with two alternative funding options to the original Option 1 (scaling all School National Funding Formula (SNFF) factors by the same percentage) which had been discussed in the meeting in November and that were intended to result in a more even distribution of the funding increase to the smallest schools by adjusting the value of the fixed lump sum payment: Option 2 was to phase the reduction in lump sum payment over two years and Option 3 was to phase the reduction over three years. No other changes had been made to the original approach to allocating funds to schools.

The Forum expressed the following:

- The benefit of the new Options for 1 FE schools would be higher;
- The Forum didn't yet have all the facts needed to make the decision;
- Reducing the PAN at other schools to address surplus places could lead to more 1 FE schools (although Paul Clark advised that BFC was not intending to create more 1 FE schools);
- Historically the Forum have not voted against views gathered from consultations, and Option 1 arose from the recent consultation;
- The Forum was very uncomfortable making this decision and felt that, in effect, it would be playing off secondary schools against 1FE schools; and
- The Forum would need to consider carefully what this would do to pupils in 1FE schools, given the turbulence predicted.

Councillor Barnard advised that he would take a decision based on the recommendation of the Forum, and expressed that he would hope to find a way through to maintain viability.

The Forum questioned whether it would be worth noting school deficits and whether they were proportionate to income. Paul Clark advised that further work would be done on this.

RESOLVED to AGREE

1. as decision maker, in respect of the funding policy for new schools:
 - i. that no reasonable adjustments needed to be made to the funding policy for the next financial year;
 - ii. the resultant Growth Fund allocations, as set out in Annex 3 of the report; and
 - iii. the proposed update to the current policy, as set out in Annex 6 of the report, as well as uplifts to factor values required through other budget decisions; and
2. as adviser to the Executive Member for Children and Young People, that no changes should be made to the fixed lump sum payment payable to all schools through the BF Funding Formula to raise funding levels for 1 FE schools, with the intention of further investigating the impact for 1 FE schools.

130. **Dates of Future Meetings**

The next meeting of the Forum was due to be held on Thursday 16 January 2020 commencing at 4:30pm (preceded by a briefing for members at 3:30pm).

CHAIRMAN